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THE COMMISSION ON RELIGIOUS EDUCATION – A RESPONSE TO L. PHILIP BARNES

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ABSTRACT: In a recent article, L. Philip Barnes critiques the Commission on Religious Education (CoRE) Final Report by scrutinising its text and by responding to my interpretation of that text. His particular, but not exclusive, focus is CoRE's proposal that the idea of worldview should be central to RE. His conclusion is that: 'The collective force of these criticisms counsels against implementing the proposals of CoRE. Religious education needs to look elsewhere than to a worldview curriculum to overcome its current travails'. This article responds by arguing that Barnes fails to justify his conclusion because his critique does not meet the standards of a fair and responsible treatment of his chosen focal texts. In particular, it misrepresents and misinterprets the CoRE Report and overlooks the alternative interpretation that I and others offered.

Keywords: Commission on RE (CoRE), L. Philip Barnes, interpretation, worldview

INTRODUCTION

In a recent article, L. Philip Barnes (2021) critiques the Commission on Religious Education (CoRE) Final Report (2018) by scrutinising its text and by challenging my interpretation of that text (Cooling, 2020). In response, the focus of this article is a question: Does Barnes' critique exemplify the standards of a fair and responsible interpretation?

For a critique to be fair and responsible it needs to take account of two horizons, that of the interpreter and that of the interpreted text. There are two key scholarly responsibilities. The first is to acknowledge the preunderstandings that the interpreter brings with them, so that they are transparent and do not overly prejudice the interpretation of the object of study. The second is to seek to understand the interpreted text as far as is possible on its own terms and in its own context, seeking to understand its intentions and to represent the argument as fairly as possible before making critical judgment. In other words, a text

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cannot be made to mean just anything. Respect for the author means that his or her intentionality is represented as fairly as possible.

Barnes (2021, p. 8) supports both these criteria. For example, in relation to the horizon of the interpreter, he notes that many pupils approach RE with a non-religious,

critical stance towards religion. He argues that pupils need to be 'aware of the beliefs and commitments … . that they bring to their study of religions and religious phenomena'. In his recent book, Barnes (2020, pp. 108–110) points to the issue of the perspective of the interpreter and the influence prior beliefs have on our acts of interpretation.

In relation to the horizon of the interpreted text, his response to one of his own critics makes the point. He accuses said critic of constructing 'a false portrait of my position' saying:

> he may believe himself to have made effective criticisms, but this is an "empty" victory, as the criticisms he raises are against arguments and positions of his own constructing, not mine. My position emerges unscathed because it is misrepresented, misinterpreted and overlooked … .Genuine dialogue assumes that contrary viewpoints and positions are faithfully and respectfully expressed (Barnes, 2020, p. 108).

It seems valid then to apply these standards to Barnes' own work. In my opinion, Barnes has been a perceptive and insightful critic of developments in RE over many years (Cooling, 2021). However, I will argue that his recent article falls short by not revealing his own preunderstanding, by misrepresenting and misinterpreting CoRE and by overlooking the interpretation of CoRE that I offer in my article. There are indeed important questions to be asked about CoRE, but Barnes critique in this article is not a fair and responsible treatment.

Barnes' Preunderstanding

The Commission on RE was established in 2016 by the Religious Education Council of England and Wales (REC). Barnes (2020, p. 188-190) is a vocal critic of the REC, portraying it as ideologically power-hungry and seeking to impose its views on the rest of the RE community. He regards it as 'self-serving' and making an 'attempt to gain power and control over the future direction and provision of religious education' (Barnes, 2020, p. 189). He warns of the danger posed by such so-called experts (Barnes, 2020, pp. 192–195). He is not opposed to expertise in itself, but asserts it is a claim that must be justified based on evidence and not the exercise of power, arguing that '(W)e live in an age when many legitimately claim expertise, while not all deserve this accolade' (p. 193). In Barnes' view, it seems that the REC exemplifies such. He represents the REC as establishing CoRE with a view to perpetrating its ideology and taking control

of RE to further its own interests (Barnes, 2020, pp. 188–190). In his article, Barnes does not acknowledge this prior animosity towards the REC.

Matters of ideology, power and politics are indeed important in considering influences on how subjects are approached by schools. But what are the facts in this case? The REC is the umbrella organisation for RE in England. It is governed by volunteer Directors. Each is elected for a fixed term of three years by the members at the AGM. REC membership is made up of around

60 organisations that are active in RE in some way. Some represent those professionally involved in RE and some represent faith and belief communities that have an interest in the content taught. Any organisation involved in RE may apply to join. It is an extraordinarily diverse membership and brings together people working in RE in many different capacities.[1]

In relation to CoRE, the terms of reference for the 14 commissioners appointed by the REC included that they were each to act in a personal, independent capacity and not as a representative of either a professional or religious/non-religious community (CoRE, 2018, pp. 78–80). The REC provided the Secretariat, but the Commission was independent of it. The REC did not have jurisdiction over the final text of the report, which was authored for the commissioners by an independent consultant. Following the publication of the Final Report, the REC Directors (i.e., its trustees) endorsed the vision of the report and the usefulness of its recommendations and initiated a programme of work to develop that vision and explore its implications.

There is, then, an alternative interpretation of the REC and the Commission to the hostile one offered by Barnes. This is that by establishing CoRE it has, through consultation and by drawing on wide-ranging, independent expertise, sought to promote a vision for RE that is fit for purpose for the next decade. Barnes hostility to the REC is important background to his recent article. The suspicion is that his preunderstanding has unhelpfully prejudiced his interpretation of both the REC and its advocacy and development of CoRE's vision.

Consider, for example, one of Barnes' (2021, p. 13) asides where he accuses CoRE of 'failure to refer to research findings' . This comment ignores the extensive footnoted references to published research in the text. It also discounts the consultation and research undertaken by the Commission in order to ascertain the range of thinking about RE in the community. CoRE (2018, pp. 81–97) gives details of the 1,377 responses to a preliminary initial online survey and the 673 written responses to the Interim Report (CoRE, 2017). In addition, consultation meetings were held around the country, including a full-day event in London with 45 participants representing a range of religious, academic and professional interests. Oral evidence was presented to the commissioners by around 60 individuals including school pupils. Commissioners attended other meetings as guests of 46 organisations. It is true that CoRE, as a policy paper,

did not meet the criteria of an academic research paper, but to accuse it of 'failure to refer to research findings' is a misrepresentation.

Following the publication of CoRE, the REC has been active in developing an interpretation of its vision and its significance for RE. Of particular interest is its Worldview Project, in progress at the time of writing, which is seeking to clarify a range of understandings of the worldview idea that might reinvigorate RE. To date this project has produced a multidisciplinary academic literature review (Benoit *et al*., 2020) that traces the use of the term in several disciplines and a set of discussion papers (Tharani, 2020) that emerged from a series of five online consultations with 13 senior academics on how the worldview idea might be relevant to the school RE classroom. The next step will be to exemplify how different understandings of worldview translate into different types of RE syllabus. If the REC is successful in achieving its goals, a shared vision based on the worldview approach in RE will emerge that is differently expressed in different syllabuses as appropriate for different school contexts.

The REC does not, therefore, regard the CoRE Report as the final word. Rather, it is taken as indicating a useful direction, which the REC is pursuing through a wide-ranging, ongoing process of literature review, consultation and project work so as to explore its implications and potential for schools. The success of the worldview initiative does not therefore depend solely on the veracity of the original CoRE text, but also on the subsequent exploration of its implications. Barnes has overlooked these developments. He has instead, as I shall go on to argue, prosecuted the CoRE text, employing a hermeneutical lens that has the intention of securing a guilty verdict. My argument is that this undeclared hostility to the REC and CoRE means that his critique in the article does not meet the standards of a fair and responsible interpretation.

I shall now apply the three failings of misrepresentation, misinterpretation and overlooking that Barnes identifies in his own critic to his recent article.

Misrepresentation

One problem with Barnes' article is that he misrepresents the CoRE Report and then builds his critique on that misrepresentation, thereby invalidating his argument. I have already given an example of this misrepresentation with reference to his comments on research. To illustrate the point further, I will examine the section entitled 'Dialogue and Debate or Statutory Enforcement' (Barnes, 2021, p. 2–3).

Barnes' purpose in this section is to contrast his preferred approach to reforming RE, which values the impetus created by diversity in syllabuses and types of provision, to the CoRE approach that he describes as 'imposed "top-down" uniformity' (Barnes, 2021, p.3). I agree with Barnes on the desirability of his preferred approach, but his representation of CoRE as promoting a one-

size-fits-all policy of syllabus imposition is an unfair and irresponsible misrepresentation.

Again, some contextual background is necessary. Syllabuses for subjects on the National Curriculum in England are developed at national level. This is not the case with RE, which is unique in being compulsory for all publicly maintained schools but is not part of the National Curriculum. Rather, syllabuses are prepared by different bodies for different schools, including, for example, by local authorities for their community schools and by the Church of England for its religious character schools. Additionally, non-religious character academies[2] that are not under local authority control are required to teach a local authority type-syllabus as a condition of their funding agreement with central government. There are, therefore, in England a hundred plus different RE syllabuses. For now, I will focus on the local authority syllabuses, as it is these that Barnes is particularly concerned about.

The current legislation requiring local authorities to produce statutory agreed syllabuses was laid down in the 1944 Education Act as a mechanism for solving arguments about what should be taught in RE in their schools. The agreed syllabuses mechanism is designed to achieve a consensus between the local faith communities, teachers and local authority officials who, by law, serve on syllabus conferences. Nowadays, as most local authorities no longer employ specialist advisers, these conferences are usually supported by consultants who do most of the writing and often set the educational rationale. As more schools become academies, thereby opting out of local authority control, this system is becoming increasingly anachronistic with local authorities required to produce syllabuses for ever smaller numbers of schools. Understandably they often resort to importing syllabuses from another local authority or from a commercial provider. There are a few notable exceptions, like the City of Birmingham, where significant financial investment is made by the local authority, but often syllabus production is a hand-to-mouth affair and may actually have little local input to its design if a syllabus is bought in (NASACRE, 2021).

The real value of this local activity, and here I agree with Barnes, is the network of support and interest that it creates around RE teaching in schools, particularly through the involvement of local faith communities. These local bodies are outstanding examples of inter-faith co-operation. However, there is a huge question over whether these arrangements around syllabus construction are now fit for purpose and financially sustainable. CoRE's judgment was that they were not, regarding them as creating inequity of provision across the country, making pupils subject to a lottery where their experience of RE depended on their local authority's postcode.

In particular, this diversity of syllabuses means that, unlike other subjects, nationally there is no shared vision for what RE is meant to achieve. CoRE

sought to remedy this by proposing a National Entitlement that would offer a baseline vision for all schools. This was not a recommendation for developing a national syllabus, but rather for adopting a National Entitlement made up of a series of brief general statements comprising around 1000 words in total that outlined this vision (CoRE, 2018 pp. 12–13). The proposal was that this National Entitlement would be the framework against which RE in both religious character and community schools should be judged through their respective inspection processes.

CoRE (2018, pp. 41–43) proposed the removal of the legal obligation on local authorities to produce statutory syllabuses, thus relieving them of an onerous responsibility for which many are now ill-equipped. In its place, it proposed that different bodies would be free to develop syllabuses based on the National Entitlement, including local authorities, academy chains, religious bodies, charities, commercial providers and individual schools (CoRE, 2018, p. 40). It would then be the professional responsibility of each school to make the decision as to which syllabus it adopted or adapted.

However, CoRE also recognised that many schools might appreciate support from the national level, so it also recommended the establishment by the Department for Education of a body that would produce programmes of study based on the National Entitlement that schools could choose to use (CoRE, 2018, pp. 39–40). Barnes (2021, p. 3) suggestion that such a body would 'determine the form and content of religious education', thereby 'stifling innovation' and losing the 'engine of reform' created by diversity of syllabuses is a misrepresentation. There was no suggestion that these national programmes of study should be mandatory. Indeed, rather than suppressing diversity, CoRE's recommendations increased schools' freedom by suggesting that the current legal obligation that they *must* use the syllabus of the local authority in which they are located be removed and replaced by the freedom to choose their own syllabus as long as they can demonstrate they are fulfilling the National Entitlement. CoRE thereby valued the professionalism of teachers when it comes to syllabus writing.

The CoRE proposal does not, therefore, advocate top-down imposition of syllabus uniformity as argued by Barnes. Rather it envisaged that different syllabus writers would interpret the National Entitlement in ways appropriate for the context of their own schools. This was particularly important for religious character schools, which, in law, have the right to teach RE in a manner that reflects the foundational trust deed of the school. CoRE respects that in its recommendations. Barnes (2021, p. 2) describes this as a 'concession', thereby attributing to the commissioners a reluctance for which he offers no evidence.

The CoRE initiative is properly interpreted as seeking to avoid an *anything goes* attitude to syllabus construction, thus bringing RE more into line with

National Curriculum subjects. Adopting the CoRE recommendations would not, then, result in the same imposed, monolithic syllabus being used in every school, but rather the existence of a shared vision for the subject expressed in different ways depending on school context (CoRE, 2018, para. 53).

CoRE, however, recognised that this lifting of the legal obligation on local authorities to produce an RE syllabus did potentially threaten the invaluable local support for RE provided through the bodies called Standing Advisory

Councils on RE. It therefore recommended that legislation was enacted to reconstitute these as Local Advisory Networks, with ring-fenced funding from central government (CoRE, 2018, pp. 52–57). This body would have a variety of functions designed to energise local support for RE, including that given by local faith communities.

In its follow-up work to CoRE, the REC has established a major project to support the development of a variety of syllabuses inspired by the worldview idea. There are also examples of classroom resources independently emerging that exemplify the worldview vision, but which employ very different approaches (Cooling *et al*., 2020, p. 61–69). These initiatives resonate with Barnes' belief in the energy that emerges from diversity of provision. His assertion that CoRE set out to undermine such diversity through top-down imposition is a misrepresentation.

MISINTERPRETATION

I have now discussed two examples of misrepresentation by Barnes. In this section I challenge examples of misinterpretation of CoRE's worldview proposal that are not unique to Barnes, but are serious.

Barnes claims that CoRE proposes 'a worldview curriculum' (Barnes, 2021, p. 2) or 'religion and worldviews curriculum' (p. 7). This terminology is not used either in CoRE or in my article and it reveals a major misunderstanding on his part that distorts his interpretation of the texts that he critiques. This manifests itself in three significant ways.

MISINTERPRETING CORE: CURRICULUM CONTENT

First, he interprets the worldview recommendation as being primarily about enlarging the content of the curriculum, overloading it by adding non-religious worldviews like Humanism. Introducing his article, he claims that: 'The Report recommends that the formal content of religious education be extended beyond that of religions (as religious worldviews) to incorporate a range of non-religious worldviews to all key stages – to be studied on equal terms with religions' (Barnes, 2021, p. 1). He later describes CoRE's intent in relation to

RE as being to 'enlarge its content to include non-religious worldviews' (Barnes, 2021, p.2). He then states that CoRE's proposed 'worldview curriculum' would oblige pupils to study 'a minimum of ten or more different religions and worldviews' arguing that this will 'inevitably become a summary review or a Cook's tour . . . .that will necessarily result in superficial teaching, simplistic learning and confused pupils' (p.7). He argues that: 'Too many religions are already recommended for study and to add worldviews makes an already bad educational practice worse' (p. 8).

Unfortunately, in interpreting the CoRE Report as *primarily* focused on *adding* non-religious worldviews to the study of religions in RE, Barnes has, simply, missed the point. There is no mention of this in the Report's 97 pages, it was denied by commissioners after the publication of the report (Cush, 2021, p. 152) and in my own discussion of CoRE that he critiques, and it is not the interpretation of CoRE that has been developed in the follow-up publications from the REC (Benoit *et al*., 2020; Tharani, 2020). Rather, these documents all assume that teaching of non-religious worldviews is standard practice accepting that: 'Nonreligious worldviews have increasingly been included as a legitimate area for study in RE' (CoRE, 2018, p. 30), as indeed Barnes (2021, pp. 12-13) himself accepts. Barnes' suggestion that CoRE recommends that teaching about non-religious worldviews should be 'on equal terms with religions' or 'in equal measure' (Barnes, 2021, p. 1) is nowhere to be found in either CoRE or in my article. It seems likely that Barnes' interpretation of CoRE reflects his own longstanding objections to teaching non-religious worldviews (Barnes, 2015 &, 2020, pp. 99–116). Barnes is correct to highlight the question of content overload as one that needs resolving but maintaining that a text advocates something that it does not is neither a fair nor responsible interpretation.

Barnes' phrase 'a worldview curriculum' with its implication of adding information is therefore unhelpful. To fairly interpret CoRE's position on the curriculum, the reader should turn to the National Entitlement, described as 'a set of organising principles which form the basis for developing programmes of study' (CoRE, 2018, p. 32). It lies at the heart of CoRE's recommendations on curriculum planning, but Barnes does not discuss it. It comprises nine statements that encapsulate the nature of worldviews and which pupils need to know and understand through their learning about worldviews (pp. 34–35). An example is: 'Pupils must be taught the ways in which worldviews develop in interaction with each other, have some shared beliefs and practices as well as differences, and that people may draw upon more than one tradition' (p. 12). CoRE (2018) states that:

> The National Entitlement makes clear the central importance of understanding religious and non-religious worldviews as well as the conceptual categories which lead to this understanding. It sets out a clear purpose and core knowledge which all pupils across all schools must gain. It also reflects the new vision that we have

> outlined here, which will effectively prepare all pupils for the world of religious and belief diversity in which they find themselves (p. 6).
>
> To some extent, which particular worldviews are studied is not as important as whether pupils have gained an understanding of the main elements of the National Entitlement, the core skills required, the range of academic approaches to the study of worldviews, the attitudes that enable them to work with others with whom they might disagree and space to reflect on their own developing worldviews (p. 73)

As explained earlier, decisions about content are left by CoRE to the teachers and others who will design the curricula and programmes of study that will eventually be used in schools. What the National Entitlement does is to supply a vision and outline for the subject that is fit for purpose in a context where pupils have to cope with increasing diversity in society at large. Its primary focus is on 'powerful, conceptual knowledge that all pupils need to have' (Tharani, 2020, p. 9). Barnes, however, ignores the key role the National Entitlement plays in curriculum planning in CoRE, instead focusing on his own concern with the addition of non-religious worldviews to the curriculum. Although Barnes' concern with content overload is legitimate, he has misinterpreted CoRE by ignoring the recommended role of the National Entitlement in curriculum planning.[3]

Misinterpeting Core: paradigm Shift

In his foreword to the CoRE Report, its Chair, The Very Reverend Dr John Hall, said that the commissioners offered a new vision for RE that was for all pupils in all schools whatever their own family background and personal beliefs. This, it was said, needed 'to move beyond an essentialised study of six "major world faiths" and towards a deeper understanding of the complex diverse and plural nature of worldviews' (CoRE, 2018, p. 6). In deploying the notion of worldview, I argued that CoRE's primary intention was to instigate a paradigm shift in the way RE is taught rather than to add additional content as Barnes interprets it (Cooling, 2019 &, 2020; Cooling *et al*., 2020).

Barnes picks up this idea of paradigm shift in his penultimate paragraph and rightly points out that a new paradigm can only claim to be such when it has identified the weaknesses of earlier paradigms that it seeks to replace. CoRE does this in its extensive discussion of the weaknesses of the current situation with RE in schools. However, other than this mention, Barnes ignores the idea of a paradigm shift and misinterprets CoRE by assuming as normative the very paradigm that CoRE is seeking to replace.[4]

The clue to the proposed paradigm shift lies in CoRE's concern about the 'essentialised study of six major world faiths'. In the literature, this essentialised study is termed the World Religions paradigm. It is criticised for its distortion of

the lived experience of religious believers through the assumption of fixed, monochrome, authoritarian representations of pillarized religions, portraying them as package deals. The criticism is that this approach is colonising and does not reflect the real religious landscape (Owen, 2011; Dinham and Shaw, 2015; Benoit *et al*., 2020, p. 7–8; Tharani, 2020, p. 10–14).[5] Correcting the influence of this paradigm on school RE was the focus of Robert Jackson's pioneering ethnographic work, which highlights issues of representation and

interpretation in RE and emphasises the importance of understanding the lived experience of adherents (Jackson, 1997). CoRE built on Jackson's lead.

One of the other key problems with the World Religions paradigm is that it puts undue emphasis on content coverage of these pillarized traditions, which, in turn, creates unrealistic expectations of what the school RE curriculum can achieve. Barnes rightly notes this problem in his article. However, his solution is to engage in what might be called turf wars by mounting a campaign to protect the already unmanageable current coverage of religion by resisting the addition of other possible contenders, particularly Humanism. This approach cultivates a mindset that both over-values comprehensive coverage and nurtures anxiety amongst adherents about whether their tradition is getting adequate exposure in the curriculum.

CoRE's response is to offer a completely different way of thinking about curriculum design by focusing on the way in which all humans make sense of their lives through a study of how religious and non-religious worldviews work in human life. Curriculum design is not then primarily a matter of arguing about coverage and which worldviews to include, but is, rather, about using the principles outlined in the National Entitlement to plan pupils' learning about how worldviews work. Selection of which traditions to study then becomes a professional judgment for teachers to make at the local level as appropriate to their own context and the educational needs of their pupils rather than being an attempt to balance the demands of various religious and non-religious communities.[6] Tharani (2020, p. 5), suggests that by focusing on the idea of worldview, CoRE was providing a 'can opener concept, reopening the study of religious and non-religious worldviews and their interplay, at organised and personal levels and in-between, so that every young person can see themselves as having something to learn and to contribute'.

As we have seen, Barnes misinterpretation is that CoRE's fundamental intention was the *addition* of non-religious worldview content to the curriculum. His critique is based on that assumption. He was thereby operating from within the world religions paradigm. To do this is to misinterpret CoRE, which was challenging that paradigm by offering another way of thinking about the curriculum. Barnes never engages with CoRE's proposed new way of thinking.

MISINTERPRETING CORE: WORLDVIEW

In his critique, Barnes discusses at length what CoRE means by worldview and highlights many weaknesses. The essence of his argument appears to be that CoRE is confused in its use of the term, resulting in its ignoring how it is properly understood and failing to appreciate the negative impact that this proper understanding would inevitably have on the RE curriculum.

I agree with Barnes that the CoRE Report is not a carefully worked through, philosophically sophisticated treatment of the worldview concept. He raises several important questions. For example, CoRE does not clarify the relationship between what it calls institutional and personal worldviews. Indeed, it looks like they might be two quite different phenomena and perhaps using the term *worldview* for both is misleading (Cooling, 2020, p. 409). Nor are all its attempts at definition consistent with each other and the examples it gives are not always convincing. Furthermore, the important balance between representing an institutional worldview as a unified phenomenon and as a diverse phenomenon needs further attention. However, to reject CoRE's vision because it does not meet the standards required of an academic, peer-reviewed philosophical thesis is short-sighted and to misunderstand its genre.

The REC has treated CoRE as a work in progress, offering a fresh vision of what RE might become, but not as a blueprint to be slavishly implemented. Hence Tharani's (2020, p. 5) description of its worldview idea as a 'can opener', which rejects treating it as a precisely defined concept but promotes its use as a concept that opens-up thinking through identifying family resemblances between different uses of the term. The publications that the REC has produced to follow-up CoRE are, therefore, attempts at clarifying and developing the proposed worldview vision, with the aim of exposing its academic foundations, exploring its pedagogical potential and stimulating professional thinking as to its application (Benoit *et al*., 2020; Tharani, 2020). Barnes' article takes no account of the possibility of such a programme of work.

For example, following philosopher Michael Hand (2018), he agrees that most people do not have what is '*properly* described as a worldview' (my emphasis) which is 'a theory of the meaning of life, an account of the significance, origin and purpose of human existence' adding that it should demonstrate 'a *reflective*, philosophical view of the nature of reality' (emphasis in original), i.e. a 'systematically ordered and comprehensive worldview' (Barnes, 2021, p. 9). He argues that, given this *proper* understanding, a worldview approach inevitably focuses on propositional beliefs (p.11). On that basis, he supports Hand in rejecting CoRE's central assertion that 'everyone has a worldview' (CoRE, 2018, p. 26), which is its justification for making worldview the backbone of RE.

Of course, Hand's and Barnes' proposal is *one possible* understanding of the term, but to assert, without justification, that it is the *proper* understanding is to

ignore the wide-ranging academic discussion in the scholarly literature (see Cooling, 2020, p. 406) and which the REC literature review expounds (Benoit *et al*., 2020). An example is James Sire's more open definition of worldview:

> A commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart, that can be expressed as a story or in a set of propositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or
>
> entirely false) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic constitution of reality and that provides the foundation on which we live and move and have our being (Sire, 2015, p.141).

In my article, I propose a more nuanced understanding of worldview (Cooling, 2020, pp. 408–410), but Barnes makes no reference to this. To ignore this discussion in one of the texts being critiqued and assert a so-called 'proper' definition, would not seem to constitute a fair and responsible critique.

What is more surprising is that, having asserted this proper view, Barnes also highlights some of the complexity surrounding the term. For example, he points to the fuzzy edges of personal worldviews (p. 10) saying: 'People can hold a range of beliefs and values, not always consistent with each other' (p. 4). He also correctly identifies the overlaps between humanism, atheism and agnosticism and their shared belief in naturalism (p. 5). Furthermore, in his recent book, he writes approvingly of the exploration with pupils of the impact of 'preliminary understanding' and applauds the contribution of CoRE to the discussion of this idea (Barnes, 2020, p. 108–110). Indeed, he comments there that: 'Quite rightly the RE Commission points out that everyone has a worldview and we can conceive of them as high-level preliminary understandings' (p. 109). His description of worldview here resonates with Tharani's (2020) can-opener model rather than with his more recent advocacy of a *proper* understanding. It is unclear as to why his position on this has changed. The new, hostile position is a clear misinterpretation of CoRE's discussion of worldview, given its unsupported assertion of a definition that is apparently chosen to discredit the texts he is interpreting.

Overlooking Pedagogy

This brings us to the nub of the debate. Fundamentally, I interpret the worldview initiative as about pedagogy, not curriculum and content.[7]

Barnes accuses CoRE of ignoring pedagogy (p. 13). He points to the weaknesses in current RE practice identified by Ofsted and others, concluding that in CoRE 'there is no attempt to show how a religion and worldviews curriculum will overcome them' (p. 12).

Barnes is correct that CoRE omits significant discussion of pedagogy, although he ignores my attempt to rectify that (Cooling, 2020, p. 410–411). Furthermore, other than one aside, he offers no pedagogical insights of his own. His aside is to argue that because the study of worldviews 'is a highly ramified,

intellectual and abstract philosophical form of study' (p. 11), it is questionable that primary, or indeed secondary, pupils have the conceptual means to handle this. He argues that 'a psychological perspective on children's cognitive development shows that most pupils in primary school are incapable (conceptually) of considering a viewpoint contrary to their own' (p. 12). Not all

primary teachers agree with him.[8] This appeal to developmental psychology is surprising given Barnes (2020, pp. 198–199) support for the inclusion of abstract Christian theological concepts in school RE, a move which was heavily criticised when it was first mooted by appeals to said developmental psychology.

However, I agree with Barnes that pedagogical discussion is important and that much work is yet to be done in understanding the implications of CoRE in this regard. Where I believe he is wrong is to represent CoRE as implying that pedagogy is *primarily* about adding abstract content.

In that respect, overlooking my discussion (Cooling, 2020, pp. 410–411) of the implications of CoRE for pedagogy is a significant failing. In that, I draw on Michael Grimmitt's (2000) conception of pedagogy in terms of the teacher promoting an educational interaction between the content studied and the pupil. Here is where the important distinction made by CoRE between what it calls institutional/organised worldviews and personal/individual worldviews becomes pertinent (CoRE, 2018, p. 4). Following Grimmitt's notion of pedagogy means that the role of the teacher is to design learning strategies that enable pupils to understand the interactive relationship between organised and personal worldviews. The aim is to promote understanding of the universal human activity of making meaning as outlined in the National Entitlement. This approach entails utilising different types of disciplinary knowledge (e.g. philosophy, theology and social sciences) to promote pupils' understanding of both the substantive knowledge of worldviews outlined on the curriculum and of their own developing personal knowledge on the part of the pupils (Kueh, 2020; Ofsted, 2021).

This, in stark contrast to Barnes' misinterpretation that CoRE is about adding content, recognises that learning is a hermeneutical activity where pupils come to understand how knowledge advances through the act of interpretation. In this process, pupils come to understand that learning in RE entails scrutinising both the organised worldview we study and our own personal worldview through which we interpret that organised worldview. There are therefore two horizons to study, not just the substantive content but also the learner's own personal knowledge. It is not being suggested, as Barnes claims (p.10), that this entails simply 'drawing out what they already believe, possibly with their prejudices intact'. Rather, it entails helping pupils to become critically aware of their own pre-understandings, of the impact of those on their perception of the worldviews they study and of the challenges to their pre-understanding that emerge from such study. In other words, it is a model of learning

that embraces personal academic development as well as substantive knowledge acquisition. It prioritises becoming a reflexive interpreter as the pedagogical goal rather than simply the mastery of subject content (Cooling *et al*., 2020, p. 51–61).

To illustrate this reflexive process, in my article I use autobiographical reflection on my own worldview development to exemplify the spiritual nature of such academic reflection on personal knowledge (Cooling, 2020, pp. 404–405). Barnes dismisses this saying: 'This is interesting, though it does not move the argument forward why religious education should enlarge its content to include non-religious worldviews in the kind of detail CoRE proposes' (p. 2). He has overlooked the key point here by returning to his misinterpretation that CoRE is fundamentally about adding content and by not engaging with the pedagogical potential that I was highlighting in the relationship between organised and personal worldviews.

CoRE's worldview emphasis entails a fundamental shift of pedagogical priority from focusing on essentialised representations of a limited number of world religions to helping pupils to understand the universal process of human meaning-making, particularly in relation to the academic encounter with religion. The role of worldview in this is summarised in the National Entitlement. In this conception, RE becomes a subject where pupils learn how to become responsible interpreters through their encounters with the religious and non-religious worldviews specified in the syllabus. By overlooking this pedagogical proposal, Barnes has failed to offer a fair and responsible discussion both of CoRE and of my interpretation of it.

Conclusion

In his article and book, Barnes helpfully identifies significant questions about CoRE and rightly points to shortcomings. He also says things about worldview that resonate with and could contribute positively to developing CoRE's worldview vision. However, his overall conclusion that '(R)eligious education needs to look elsewhere than to a worldview curriculum to overcome its current travails' (Barnes, 2020, p. 13) is unnecessarily negative, especially as he gives no guidance as to where else RE might look. I have argued that this conclusion fails because it is reached by only by misrepresenting and misinterpreting the CoRE Report and by overlooking my pedagogical interpretation of its worldview idea, which in important respects Barnes also advocates. His treatment does not meet the criteria of a fair and responsible interpretation, having been distorted by his own unexamined pre-understanding including his longstanding opposition to the inclusion of non-religious worldviews in RE and his hostility to the REC.

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NOTES

1 For members list see https://www.religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/about/our-members/

2 Academies are former local authority schools that are now independent and answerable to central government through a funding agreement.

3 See Lewin (2021) For an important discussion on managing content choice in curriculum. Interestingly, the recent Ofsted Research Review (Ofsted, 2021) tackles this problem by suggesting that a syllabus should aim to cover content that is 'collectively enough'. What exactly this means is an interesting question.

4 In his book, Barnes (2020, pp. 187–188) explores the idea of paradigm as discussed by Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor in relation to moral philosophy but does not apply his conclusion that 'ideas are embedded in traditions of thought and become meaningful within particular traditions of thought' to his discussion of CoRE and its new vision.

5 See an online discussion between David Lewin and Bob Bowie at https://blogs.canterbury.ac.uk/nicer/after-world-religions-a-conversation-with-dr-david-lewin/

6 My personal view is that it is possible to fulfil the National Entitlement through a curriculum that focuses largely on one tradition as long as it embraces internal diversity and the importance of knowledge of other traditions. It is therefore possible for religious character schools to embrace the National Entitlement. Many RE scholars will not agree with me on this, but there is an important discussion to be had about appropriate breadth and depth of study to fulfil the National Entitlement. My view is that this is a professional judgment that should be made at school level, should reflect the school's character and should be scrutinised at inspection.

7 By pedagogy I do not just mean teaching method, but rather the philosophy of education and its implications.

8 Katie Freeman, Chair of the National Association of Teachers of RE and a primary school teacher rejects this assertion about the ability of primary school pupils. https://www.reonline.org.uk/2020/07/28/our-journey-to-understanding-worldviews-in-school/.